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The BLACK BAG

By Louis Joseph Vance

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(Continued)

The door of No. 9 stood ajar, a black interval an inch or so in width showing between its edge and the jamb. Suspicion and alarm set his wits a-tingle. More distinctly he recalled the jarring bang, accompanied by the metallic click of the latch, when the girl had shut herself in—and him out. Now, some person or persons had followed her, neglecting the most obvious precaution of a householder. And why? Why but because the intruders did not wish the sound of closing to be audible to her—or those—within?

He reminded himself that it was all none of his affair, decided to pass on and go his way in peace and, impulsively swinging about, marched straight away for the unclosed door.

"Oh! and, governor!" Kirkwood halted on the cry, faltering in indecision. Should he take the plunge or withdraw? Synchronously he was conscious that a man's figure had detached itself from the shadows beneath the nearest portico and was drawing nearer, with every indication of haste to intercept him.

"Ere now, governor, yer mythin' a dymke. You don't live 'ere!" "How do you know?" demanded Kirkwood crisply, tightening his grip on his stick.

Was this the second shadow he had seemed to see—the confederate of him who had entered No. 9, a sentry to forestall interruption? If so, the fellow looked discretion, though his determination that the American should not interfere was undeniable. It was with an ugly and truculent manner, if more warily, that the man closed in.

"I know. You clear butt or—?" He lunged out a hand with the plausible design of grasping Kirkwood by the collar. The latter lifted his stick, deflecting the arm, and instinctively landed his other fist forcibly on the fellow's chest. The man recoiled back, cursing. Before he could recover Kirkwood calmly crossed the threshold, eased the door and put his shoulder to it. In another instant, fumbling in the darkness, he found the bolts and drove them home.

And it was done, the transformation accomplished. His inability to refrain from interfering had compassed his downfall, had changed a peacemaker and law abiding citizen within British shores into a bushy, a trespasser, a misadventurer, no yes, for all he knew to the contrary, in the estimation of the law, a burglar, prime candidate for a convict's stripes.

"The devil!" he whispered. "What an ass, what an utter ass, I am!" Behind him the knob was rattled urgently to an accompaniment of feet shuffling on the stone, and immediately, if he were to make a logical deduction from the rasping and scraping sound within the door creaking, the bell pull was violently agitated, without, however, eliciting any response from the bell itself, wherever that might be situated, after which, as if in despair, the outsider again rattled and jerked the knob.

Be his status what it might, whether servant of the household, its caretaker or a night watchman, the man was palpably determined both to get himself in and Kirkwood out and yet, curious to consider, determined to gain his end without attracting undue attention.

Kirkwood had expected to hear the knocker's thunder as soon as the bell failed to give tongue, but it did not sound, although there was a knocker. Kirkwood himself had remarked that antiquated and rusty bit of ironmongery affixed to the middle panel of the door. And it made him feel sure that something surreptitious and furtive was in process within those walls; that the confederate without, having failed to prevent a stranger from entering, left unemployed a means so certain sure to rouse the occupants.

But his inferential analysis of this phase of the proceedings was summarily interrupted by that identical alarm. In a trice the house was filled with flying echoes, unbroken to sonorous riot by the crash and clamor of the knocker, and Kirkwood stood fully two yards away, his heart hammering wildly, his nerves a-jingle, much as if the resounding blows had landed upon his own person rather than on stout oaken planking.

Ere he had time to wonder the racket ceased, and from the street filtered voices in altercation. Listening, Kirkwood's pulses quickened, and he laughed uncertainly for pure relief, retreating to the door and putting an ear to a crack.

The accents of one speaker were new to his hearing, stern, crisp, quick with the spirit of authority which animates that most austere and dignified hub of the law to be encountered in the world over, a London bobly.

"Now, then, my man, what do you want there? Come, now; speak up and step out into the light where I can see you."

The response came in the sniffling snarl of the London ne'er-do-well, the unemployable rogue whose chief occupation seems to be to march in the ranks of the unemployed on the occasion of his annual demonstrations.

"Let me alone, carter-er? Ah! do in' no 'arm, officer."

"Didn't you hear me? Step out here. Ah, that's better. No harm, eh? Perhaps you'll explain how there's no harm breakin' into unoccupied houses?"

"Gorblimy, 'ow was I to know? 'Ere's a toll, 'eeds me 'apence for 'opment! 'Is any door 'olpe, an', sence, 'My man, 'e yes, 'e've got a 'onest face, 'W's 'ouchter work? 'eese, 'Ow can I? 'e's I, 'The 'in I 'out of a job these six months, lookin' for work every day an' can't find it! 'Sence, 'Come an' see me this 'evenin' at me 'ome, 'olpe, 'Prognostic 'e've, 'e's, an'—"

"That'll do for now. You borrow a pencil and paper and write it down, and I'll read it when I've got more time. I never heard the like of it. This 'case hasn't been lived in them two years. Move on, and don't let me find you round 'ere again, 'Marble, 'eay?"

There was more of it—more whining explanations, artfully threaded with abuse, more terse commands to depart, the whole contending with scolding footstep, dimming, and another peremptory rattle of the knob as the lobby, having shown the putative evildoer off, assured himself that no damage had actually been done.

Then he, too, departed, satisfied and self-righteous, leaving a lady frightened but very grateful to her criminal to pursue his self-applied career of crime.

He had no choice other than to continue. In point of fact, it had been insanity just then to back out and run the risk of apprehension at the hands of that ubiquitous bobly, who, for all he knew, might be lurking not a dozen yards distant, watchful for just such a sequel.

Still, Kirkwood hesitated with the best of excuses. Reasoning as he had found the sentinal's extemporized yarn, proof positive that the fellow had had no more right to prohibit a trespasser than Kirkwood to commit one, at the same time he found himself pardonably a prey to emotions of the utmost consternation and alarm.

If he feared to leave the house he had no warrant whatever to assume that he would be permitted to remain many minutes unharmed within its walls of mystery.

The silence of it discomfited him beyond measure. It was, in a word, uncanny.

Before him as he lingered at the door, vaguely disclosed by a wan illumination penetrating a dusty and begrimed fault, a broad hall stretched indefinitely toward the rear of the building, losing itself in blackness beyond the foot of a flight of stairs. Save for a few articles of furniture—a hall table, an umbrella stand, a tall, dumb clock flanked by high-backed chairs—it was empty.

Other than Kirkwood's own restrained respiration not a sound threatened the house advertised beneath the pressure of a foot, not a mouse rustled in the woodwork or beneath the doors, not a breath of air stirred, sighing in the stillness.

And yet a tremendous racket had been raised at the front door within the sixty seconds past. And yet within twenty minutes two persons at least had preceded Kirkwood into the building. Had they not heard? The speculation seemed child's play, or had they heard and started, both too of feebly inhibited by the coils of their nefarious deed as to dare reveal themselves, to investigate the cause of that thunderous commotion? Or were they, perhaps, aware of Kirkwood's entrance and lying hidden in some dark corner to ambush him as he passed?

True, that was hardly like the plan. True, on the other hand, it was possible that the she-devil stolen away while Kirkwood was hanging in irresolution by the passage to Quadrant passage. Again, the space of time between Kirkwood's departure and his reappearance had been exceedingly brief. Whatever he heard, he could hardly have forgotten it and escaped. At that moment he might be in the power and at the mercy of him who had followed her, provided he were not friendly. And if that came what torment and what peril might not be hers!

Stunned by soliloquy, the young man put personal apprehensions in perspective and forgot them, cautiously following his way through the room to the foot of the stairs. Slowly he began to descend, a hard following the foot of the stairs, the other with his eyes exploring the obscurity before him. On the steps a carpet, thick and heavy, muffled his footfalls. He moved noiselessly. Toward the top the staircase curved, and presently a foot that groped for a higher level failed to find it. Again he halted, nearly distraught.

Nothing happened.

He went on, guided by the halustrated, passing three doors, all open, through which the undisturbed proportions of a drawing room and boudoir were barely suggested by a ghostly dusk. By each he paused, listening, hearing nothing.

His foot struck with a deadened thud against the bottom step of the second flight, and his pulses fluttered wildly for a moment. Two minutes—three—he waited in suspense. From above came no sound. He went on, as before, save that twice a step yielded, complaining, to his weight.

(To Be Continued)

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